



THE INQUIRER

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The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians



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THE INQUIRER

The Unitarian and Free Christian Paper

Established in 1842, The Inquirer is the oldest nonconformist religious newspaper.

"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."

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Editor: M Colleen Burns MA
46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich
NR4 6UF T: 01603 505281

E: inquirer@btinternet.com

Proofreader: Sarah Reynolds

Cover: Peggy and Marco Lachmann-Anke

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Write to: Steven Bisby

71 Earlesmere Avenue, Balby, Doncaster,
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E: admin@inquirer.org.uk

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Find out more about Unitarians

The General Assembly, Essex Hall
1-6 Essex Street, London WC2R 3HY
T: 0207 2402384

E: info@unitarian.org.uk

www.unitarian.org.uk

Inquiring Words...

You must not lose faith in humanity. Humanity is an ocean; if a few drops of the ocean are dirty, the ocean does not become dirty.

Mohandas K Gandhi

What are you up to?

Send in your local news

I'm not sure why, but recently I have received less and less 'local news' – photographs and stories about what our congregations and fellowships are doing. I know there's a lot going on – social justice projects, fund-raisers, building work, parties – so please submit your stories. We can all get ideas of things to do in our own groups.

- **For an event:** Write a press release. Include contact details: who, what, when, where and why and a quote from an organiser of the event or from a participant. Advance press releases to publicise events should be received by the editor eight weeks before the event.

- **Send a photograph:** Photos should be at least 300 dpi, if sent as jpegs. Hard copies, printed on photographic paper are also welcome. No matter the format, photos should be light and clear. Photos taken from the back of a church are rarely suitable for publication.

- **Worship material:** Prayers, sermons, meditations are always welcome. If you attend a service and you like what was said, encourage the leader to send a copy to *The Inquirer*. Or, if you present a service you would like to share, please send the copy in.

- **Ideas:** Always, always welcome. If you would like to write an original piece, please contact the editor to discuss a deadline and length. Even if you are unable to do that, send your article in anyway. Unsolicited manuscripts will always be considered.

- **Letters:** Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com. Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF. Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. An address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes. Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only and should not suggest the view expressed is representative of that body. Shorter letters are more likely to appear and less likely to be edited. No personal attacks will be published.

- **Format:** Email submissions are the most convenient. Word attachments or copy pasted into the body of an email are best.

- **Policy:** Any work not specifically attributed to another writer should be the original work of the person submitting it.

– MC Burns

Save the whales (and the pigs and the chickens)! says **Jenny Jones**

Rethinking our animal relationships

'Soon the circle [of compassion]... includes first a class, then a nation, then a coalition of nations, then all humanity, and finally, its influence is felt in the dealings of man with the animal world' – WH Lecky

A while ago I watched the Greenpeace movie, *How to Change the World*, and was reminded of their early battle cry, 'Save the Whales!' At about the same time there were reports of several strandings of whales on British and European beaches. The outpourings of public compassion reflected our conflicted relationships to animals.

We love them, we care for them and yet we also treat them – or allow them to be treated on our behalf – in ways which would horrify us if we really understood, if we really saw them. When I say it's complicated, that's a massive understatement. Why, for example, does it make the national news when whales are stranded on beaches? Why do we feel pain on their behalf – and at some level we, too, are hurt? Why do people work long and hard trying to rescue whales and lead them back out to sea? If a super-intelligent alien race landed on this planet from some far-flung galaxy, what would it make of us when it observed:

"Perhaps we can hold such widely differing ideas about animals in our heads because of how removed we have become from the processes involved."

- We treasure some animals as pets and treat them like favoured members of our family. (Sometimes we get on better with them than with our human family members.)
- The animals that we designate food are treated as if they were mere units of production. Their poor, nasty, brutish and short lives are hidden away from us (and that's the way we like it).
- Certain individual animals achieve fame and are treated like celebrities – Inky the octopus who escaped from his aquarium in New Zealand, Shamu the killer whale, Red Rum, Arkle, or going back a bit further, Cheeta, the chimp in the Tarzan movies.
- Teams of us will work long and hard to rescue a stranded whale, whilst other teams (Japanese, Norwegian, Icelandic) work long and hard to kill them.
- In Britain we eat certain types of animals, yet we

revolt at the choices made in other cultures, where horses, cats, dogs, monkeys and insects may all find their way onto the dinner table. We find those choices bizarre or disgusting, but we do not recognise that our own choices could be just as bizarre or disgusting.

• Despite the way we treat some animals there are others – such as whales – which fill us with awe, and for whom we feel instinctive empathy. I went vegetarian six years ago. At the time my reasons were largely about climate change and the global food supply and only a bit about the quality of life for the animals. Up until that

point, I'd consumed them with gusto. And for most of my life my ideas about eating meat had been pretty mainstream.

Some we love, some we kill

I could both love an individual animal, yet eat another one which had been killed for me as if the action had no more meaning, effect or consequences than eating a salad. There's a cognitive dissonance. We appreciate the sight of a spring lamb gambolling in the fields, and watch its mother calling it protectively to her side. Yet we also anticipate our Sunday roast with that same lamb, possibly, served up studded with garlic and spiked with rosemary.

(My mouth can still water at the thought...)

Perhaps we can hold such widely differing ideas about animals in our heads because of how removed we have become from the processes involved. We can only carry on eating meat because we are not confronted with what's going on behind the scenes to bring that roast to our plate.

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“Teams of us will work long and hard to rescue a stranded whale, whilst other teams (Japanese, Norwegian, Icelandic) work long and hard to kill them.”

Photo by Skeeze via Pixabay

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Reading the book of Genesis, I was brought up short with the realisation that in Eden, all creatures were vegan. Not just human beings, but animals too – it’s all there in Chapter 1:29-30. Animals were created – not to be man’s prey – but his companions:

‘God said, “See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food.” And it was so.’ (Genesis 1:29-30 New Revised Standard Version)

Paradise was vegan

In the beginning, humans got fruits and seeds, animals got salad. So when humans were expelled from Paradise, wasn’t just a fall for humans, but a fall for all of Creation. After the fall, death – and specifically killing – enters the world; the deaths of humans and the deaths of animals.

Paradise before the fall is Isaiah’s vision of the peaceable kingdom, that New Jerusalem when Paradise is restored (which we hear about every Christmas if we listen to the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols). It is significant that vegetarianism and in fact veganism (there’s no milk, cheese or eggs in the Paradise diet) is considered the ideal condition of existence. ‘None shall kill in all my holy mountain’ (Isaiah, 11.9).

Obviously the Genesis version isn’t factually true in the sense that as far as we know, life evolved with higher organisms feeding on lower organisms and thus meat eating came in very early on. And nature seems to function just as one massive food chain – although unlike human beings, nature usually takes just what it needs. But are we simply the animals who’ve made it to the top of the food chain? Or are we more than that? We don’t actually *have* to prey on other animals to the extent we do – we have the luxury of choice. And do we owe it not just to our fellow humans and the planet to reduce or end our consumption of animals – or do we also owe it to the animals themselves?

Perhaps that Biblical veganism is true as an ethical ideal – and it’s the underlying ethic that interests me; that killing other creatures, whether men or animals, is wrong, and in a perfect world wouldn’t happen.

Whatever we eat, of course, we still have to kill a lot of plants, and it’s true that in the course of arable farming, many small animals and insects are killed. Collateral damage. Maybe that’s inevitable.

Must we love mosquitoes?

And I can’t really get my head round expanding my circle of compassion to include *all* animals. Mosquitoes? Tapeworms? Headlice??! All creatures seems too much of a tall order, and unrealistic (although not for Buddhists...). Sentient animals – that seems more rational. But wherever we draw the line, there’s no reason for not going some of the way – for doing what we can, and not despairing over what we cannot. Perhaps nothing in life can be totally pure, but vegetarianism and especially veganism show much more reverence for life than does the farming of animals for meat. (I’m just slightly worried that with our increasing scientific knowledge we’ll discover that plants too have some sort of consciousness – and then what will we do!)

I have this gut feeling (and I use that term advisedly) that veganism is the right way forward, though I can’t help wanting to pray – as St Augustine did – ‘O Lord, make me good, but not yet’. Augustine had sexual continence in mind whereas I have food – boiled eggs with buttered toast in particular! But it’s the same dilemma. Our consciences push us in a direction we don’t really want to go. We cling on by our fingernails to our comfortable way of life. And it takes some extraordinary effort or greater understanding or enlightenment to move us to that higher plane or more virtuous existence. I’m not there yet.

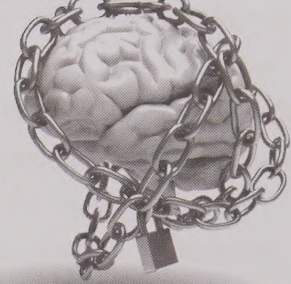
Begin where you are

But I was encouraged by words from the Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church. In a 2004 sermon he talked about making changes by beginning here, where we are right now, and as we are. And not by looking for perfection, but by beginning small and dreaming possible dreams. (See the sermon here: <https://bit.ly/2m9ubcO>)

One of the secrets to a happy life is for one’s way of living to be aligned with one’s core values. We become unhappy if we are living faithlessly, not being true to ourselves.

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Do Unitarians lack imagination?



By Alan Ruston

'Now what I want is Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts; nothing else will be of any service to them.' These are the opening words of the Charles Dickens novel, *Hard Times*. This of course was not Dickens' view at all, and he painted a harsh picture of the industrialist giving this instruction to a schoolmaster. Dickens' message in this book of 1854 was that facts had crowded out imagination which he saw as a vital quality for effective living. The question still has to be faced today – have we got imagination enough to enable us to get past an over-concentration on facts which is in our everyday world? However, few people today would call themselves unimaginative even if they are – it's almost taken as an insult if someone says of an acquaintance that they don't possess much imagination. The image of the unimaginative, someone with a literal, restricted mind with a blinkered vision of life is not one people like to be applied to themselves. Would any of us admit to being unimaginative? Probably not, though we may be. Some, like myself, admit that having imagination is not their strongest attribute. But of course it depends on what the word means. Some claim that they have lateral thinking ability, but is that imagination? This raises the question of definition. Dictionary definitions of the word imagination turn out to be a bit contradictory. The *Collins Concise Dictionary* says it's the faculty or action of producing mental images of what is not present, or in one's experience. *Cassell's Paperback Dictionary* argues that it's the mental faculty that forms ideal images or combinations of images from the impressions left by the senses. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* states that imagination is the action of imagining, or forming a mental concept of what is not actually present to the senses: the result of this is a mental image or an idea.

This leaves me confused. For they are not really saying the same thing at all! Such a simple word we use regularly and casually but is tortuous in its definition. I suppose these definitions are saying – imagination is that part of our mind which produces images, from we know not where, but not directly from our experiences or senses. However, that does not appear quite right for the imaginative can take facts and make a leap perhaps to another fact which is revelatory, but the connection is not necessarily obvious to others. It's getting too involved so I'll put it in a simpler way – imagination is seeing possibilities in the most unlikely situations. Many claim a form of imagination is necessary before religious belief and spiritual understanding is possible. Can we say that the imaginative mind is the spiritual mind? People with a restricted over-materialistic view of things, well, such people don't generally in my experience follow a religious path. We need an imaginative element within us and see beyond our mental self-containment and the hard world around us.

Critics of Unitarians have often claimed we are unimaginative. Because we generally can't believe very much without some proofs and are not willing to believe two impossibilities before breakfast, we have been judged – by some orthodox Christians in particular – as unimaginative. The evaluation has been around for over 200 years that we are not only unimaginative in our beliefs but our worship services are unemotional, dull and over factual. We feed only the mind and don't appeal to the heart which is said to make Unitarians unimaginative and lacking an emotional component. Famous figures in the past have had a low opinion of Unitarians because of our perceived lack of imagination. WE Gladstone, the 19th-century statesman, wrote that our worship was chilly and drear. The poet William Wordsworth in 1812 said the Unitarian religion allows no room for imagination, and satisfies none of the cravings of the soul. And an unexpected source – Benjamin Disraeli, another 19th-century Prime Minister said that our defect was that Unitarians leave out imagination, a quality that governs the actions of mankind.

Well I don't recognise the Unitarians that I've encountered over decades being like this. Few Unitarians today seek to have what they say, do or believe entirely governed by facts. Most seek to follow a spiritual path which requires of us to make imaginative leaps. We recognise that for our own spiritual health we can't always be governed by a sternly rational all-encompassing approach to life. Indeed, many of our personal and significant affirmations are the result of leaps of imagination that have allowed us to grow spiritually and to develop empathy. JK Rowling in an address she gave at Harvard made this point: Imagination, she said, is not only the capacity to envision that which is not, it is in consequence the fount of all invention and innovation; it's the power that enables us to empathise with people whose experiences are very different to our own. Unitarians can't avoid trying to take a rational approach to how we live our lives. It is, after all, one of our key affirmations. But if we let this go too far, developing a hard facts-only approach to everything, we run the risk of deadening whatever spiritual awareness we may possess. We must try to nurture imagination. Possibly certain key personal decisions we've taken in life came out of an imaginative leap rather than a factual analysis. Imagination is vital. But do we know the best means to foster it? What is important is that we are conscious the imaginative approach to living is the right one to follow, however difficult a path that may be. The entirely factual restricting approach has the danger that it can limit our vision. Benjamin Disraeli was right when he said imagination governs mankind, and that applies to us as well in the paths we follow through life. Imagination is that which enlivenes and quickens our living.

Alan Ruston is a Unitarian historian and a member of the Watford Fellowship.

Lynne Readett finds messages of hope in sticks, paper and twine.

Let's go fly a kite

Autumn is an ideal time to fly a kite, as the wind kicks up and the days are crisp. Kite flying closed the original Mary Poppins film and it happened again in the more recent sequel. I have only seen the old version but it is, I understand, much like the original – with the exception that Michael has grown up and has his own family. It's pure escapism and fantasy. In the original film, on the face of it, Mary Poppins comes to help the Banks family and look after their children but in reality helps them all to realise what is important in their lives and all the family sing this song:

Let's go fly a kite, up to the highest height.

*Let's go fly a kite and send it soaring.
Up through the atmosphere, up where the air is clear.*

Oh let's go fly a kite.

After all has been said and done, through the ups and downs Mr Banks has realised that it is his family that are the most important thing in his life, more important than his job, even. He mends his son's kite and takes the family outside and over the road to the park to fly the kite along with Bert the chimney sweep and many others. Mary Poppins sees all this from the bedroom window and knows that her work is done.

All is well with the Banks household and – to the amazement of everyone – the managers of the bank, where Mr Banks works, are out their flying kites too, the owner (Dick Van Dyke in disguise) even tells Mr Banks that he is to be promoted and made a partner. A happy ending all round. All because Mr Banks decided to go fly a kite!

Flying a kite, or watching someone who is good at it, is exhilarating. I don't have the skill to fly a kite; I don't suppose I have really tried very hard. But I know someone who does and she is very good at it. She's even in a club and they go to events all over the country. The only time I saw a large group of kites being flown was on holiday in Turkey with my husband, John. It was just by chance; we saw them up atop a promontory overlooking the sea. We walked up to watch, just for a few minutes, and were amazed by the skills we saw. A few minutes turned into an hour. The time passed so quickly as we became spellbound by the spectacle.

Kite flying is popular and especially so in Afghanistan. In

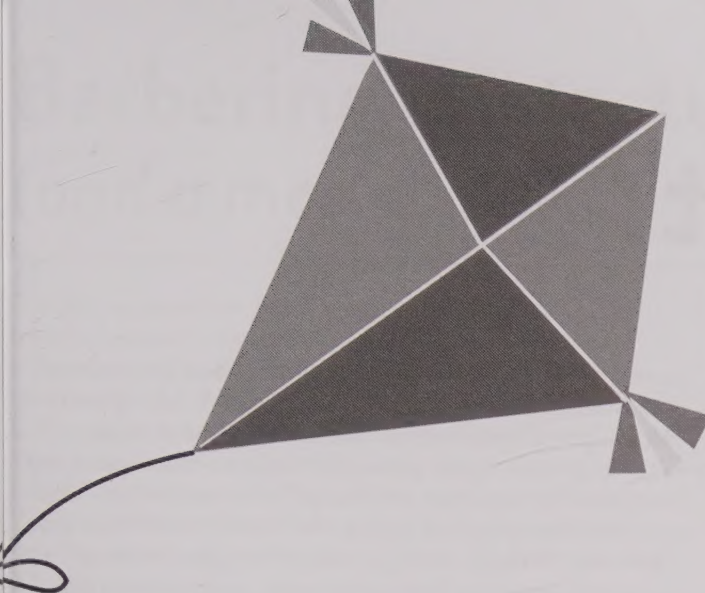
"Our freedom to think and to make our own choices, based on personal conscience is one of the greatest strengths we have."

fact, kite flying is a national sport in Afghanistan, and for more than 100 years kite flying has been at the heart of Afghan culture.

That's where another kite-flying film is set. 'The Kite Runner' is based on the book written by Khaled Hosseini. I read the book and saw the film some time ago. I was really moved by the tale. It tells the story of Amir and Hassan – two young boys of differing social backgrounds who enjoy flying kites together. Amir is from a wealthy family. Hassan is a servant in their house. It is set in the aftermath of the overthrow of the monarchy; Shah Mohammed Zahir died in 1973 at

the grand old age of 92. There was the usual power vacuum and various forces tried to take over the running of the country. The Soviets tried to rule, but even with the might of their military forces, they could not prevail. In 1996 the Taliban took over the country and ruled with an iron fist. Many of the simple pleasures enjoyed by the people were curtailed; the flying of kites was banned completely. As we know from media reportage the country was ravaged by war and desolation. There is much more to the story, but essentially it is one of friendship, good and evil, betrayal and eventual redemption. The old adage rings true that 'power corrupts but absolute power corrupts absolutely'. However, what shines through is the strong bond between the boys that grew from flying kites.

Today in Afghanistan the political situation is still shaky. There is still fighting with the Taliban faction. Last month there was a bomb attack in Kabul at a wedding celebration. Many people were killed and even more injured. But the simple pleasure of kite flying is back – and back



"The people in our lives – family, those we love, friends, community-are the braided strands, a kite string that sustains the dynamic tension between heaven and earth. They are a lifeline that allows us to be uplifted, to see further, to live more fully, and the higher we fly, the stronger our string must be. For when our connection becomes worn and frayed it can snap, and we will come tumbling back to earth, landing far from where we left, with nobody to repair our breaks or mend our tears. So rejoice in the wind-but attend to your string."

Jeffrey Lockwood

with much rejoicing. Competitions have a regular place in the national calendar and these kites are no small things either, the best ones are called 'fighter kites' and the end game is to see who can cut the string of the others kite. Kite cutting is when your kite's string severs the string of your competitor. There is a section of the string made of metal or coated in glass fragments especially for this purpose. When an opponent's string is cut, the loser's kite is launched aloft – a fate even worse than losing. The race is on to retrieve the kite. If the opponent should find the kite, it becomes theirs and the humiliation is doubled. This sport can be quite dangerous as practices often take place in the cities and towns. It's not uncommon to hear of people falling from rooftops, trying to keep control of a kite or trying to recover a severed kite before an opponent takes it. Serious stuff indeed!

The kites of Afghanistan are unique in design and are often viewed as pieces of art; they are used as a decoration in many homes. So when I read of the resurgence of kite flying in Afghanistan I was heartened. It is good to hear that after so many years of warfare the country has something good to hold aloft and be proud of.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus told the story of James and John, the sons of Zebedee. They both ask for power and they both want to be first in line when it comes to what they conceive of as being the Kingdom of God. Jesus reminded them that first shall be last and the servant of all.

Those in power would do well to read the passage from the gospel of Mark, or if they have read it, they are ignoring it. Also in Islamic culture and the writings of the Qur'an there is the imperative to serve others first. If someone comes to your house they must be looked after and served before anyone else. Those who put themselves first are told in no uncertain terms that this is wrong. Yet, again, the people to whom this is meant to speak are not listening. The story of the Kite Runners in war-torn Afghanistan illustrates this imperative once more. Those in power abuse the people they are meant to serve. War and devastation come to the country and great damage is done. But there is hope, the hope that the simple pleasure such as flying a kite can bring. The urge to control is not only seen in politics but we can see it in our everyday lives.

Even in our own Unitarian and Free Christian movement there is division and the urge to dominate. I, for one, am glad that we have differing strands within our movement, for me difference is a joy and can bring much fulfilment. But for some, there is talk of constructing a set of core beliefs

and to have a belief in a higher power, God, or whatever name we may use to speak of this higher power. To me that smacks of compulsory creeds and dogma. This is something that, as a movement, we have steered clear of. There are some who even speak of a possible split between the Unitarian and Free Christian parts of our small movement. Over the years I have changed what I consider to be my personal belief system, and I would not wish to see any division between the movement's Unitarian strand and the Free Christian strand. Our freedom to think and to make our own choices, based on personal conscience is one of the greatest strengths we have. Being able to belong to a community and having the choice of religious perspective on matters of belief is paramount. We need to know where our priorities lie. Differences of opinions are good bedfellows, and these are my priorities.

Back to Mary Poppins. She helped the Banks family solve their problems. She showed Mr Banks where his priorities lay – with his family of course. The film illustrated that taking control of our own lives can be not only a liberation of the body but a liberation of the spirit. And *The Kite Runner* illustrated that control being taken away from the ordinary people can result in the desolation of the spirit. These two very different films both have strong messages of hope.

There is always hope, a hope for people who can only see where the next meal will come from, or the next place of refuge. Hope burns eternal in our hearts and gives the human race a reason to live, survive and overcome what might seem to be insurmountable obstacles.

The German philosopher Nietzsche wrote, 'Invisible threads are the strongest ties'.

Let us go forth into the world through a door of hope for the future, recalling these words of Martin Luther.

'Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree.'



Lynne Readett

The Rev Lynne Readett is a retired Unitarian minister, previously serving the Merseyside District. She is a member of the Executive Committee of the Unitarian General Assembly.

Is it time to give up meat?

Continued from page 4 >

Cognitive dissonance is psychologically traumatic. It makes us miserable but frequently, our tendency is not to root out the cause but to treat the symptoms instead. So we try to avoid situations which make us aware of difficult, conflicting issues. That's why we hide our factory-farming away and manage not to be aware of it – despite sharing our environment with literally millions of industrially farmed pigs, chickens and calves.

Suffering beyond killing

I'm sure we'd all subscribe to the idea, no matter what our diet, that we shouldn't cause unnecessary suffering to animals. At least we think we do. But what do we consider necessary suffering – the sort we think it's OK to inflict? It's not as if we can ask the animals – they can't give or withhold their consent.

Instances of suffering which we seem to consider necessary include:

- Calves are separated from their mothers within hours of birth (12-72). Cows have maternal feelings and this separation is traumatic for them. They bellow for days, crying their pain, just as we would. It's traumatic for the calves, who have the same built-in need for bonding with their mothers that human babies do. This happens every year for dairy cows. They don't just lose one child, they lose all of them.
- The industrial process of slaughter (including, frequently, the hours-long drive to the slaughter house penned in a cattle truck without food or water).
- Factory-style farming in general. According to Yuval Noah Harari, writing in the *Guardian*, Scientists have established: 'Farm animals are sentient beings, with intricate social relations and sophisticated psychological patterns. They may not be as intelligent as us, but they certainly know pain, fear and loneliness. They too can suffer, and they too can be happy.' Modern farming practice prevents natural life and causes suffering on an industrial scale.

We play up our differences from animals, and our superior intelligence, regarding ourselves as a different order of being entirely, whilst knowing that they are capable of relationships with us and each other, and that relationship is not confined to mammals. Birds, too, (in the wild) have feelings for each other.

Another instance of cognitive dissonance; earlier in the year, the news was all over the media that a faithful stork had returned for the 15th year in a row to his mate who, with an injured wing, is unable to make the annual migration.

'Every spring' we were told, 'the Croatian public anxiously waits for the male stork to return to his partner, and every year thus far he has proved himself a faithful mate, much to everyone's delight.'

On the one hand we celebrate a 15-year relationship between two birds, a relationship which has lasted longer than many human marriages. On the other hand, we confine billions of chickens to tiny spaces within massive warehouses where any

semblance of natural life and normal relationships is denied. In the UK, the stocking density is such that a fully-grown chicken gets a space smaller than an A4 piece of paper. Free-range and organic production insist on more space, but the typical Sunday roast chicken will have more room in the oven while being cooked than it ever had to live in when alive. If that race of highly intelligent aliens I imagine came to earth, and decided to farm us for meat, would we willingly accept our fate? Would we think it only fair and just, since they, with their superior intelligence, are in relationship to us as we are to cows and chickens? Would that give them the right to pen us in warehouses and breed us for meat? And if those aliens, just because they're more intelligent, *don't* have the right to farm us, do we have the right to impose that on animals? Or should the Golden Rule (do as you would be done by) be extended to animals?

The 19th-century philosopher WH Lecky, who came up with the concept of the circle of compassion, was a vegetarian. He also wrote: 'I venture to maintain that there are multitudes to whom the necessity of discharging the duties of a butcher would be so inexpressibly painful and revolting, that if they could obtain a flesh diet on no other condition, they would relinquish it forever.'

Acting from an ethical standpoint

Killing is hard; but how much more revolting is the life of industrially farmed animals *before* they are killed?

As compassionate creatures, who share 80% of our DNA with cows, maybe now's the time we should consider expanding our circle of compassion to include not just celebrity animals, not just pet animals, not just awesomely magnificent animals, but all sentient animals. How we treat animals raises tough questions – and for each one of us, the answers may be slightly different. But we need to consider the questions and formulate and act from an ethical standpoint which feels authentic and true for us.

Maybe then, if that race of super-intelligent aliens ever come to pay us a visit, we'll be able to look them in the eye and fairly expect to be treated with compassion and as equals.



Further Information: Jenny recommends the film *Earthlings* or the book, *Eating Animals* by Jonathan Safran Foer.



Jenny Jones

Jenny Jones is a member of St Saviourgate Unitarian Chapel, York. She is also a member of the Penal and Social Affairs Panel of the Unitarian General Assembly. Her PSAP essay on meat will appear in a later issue.

Barbering, biotecture, blackberrying (and a mea culpa)

Time for a correction. In my previous column here in the *Inquirer* I quoted colleague Andrew Hill, who had spotted a *Guardian* picture of 19th-century anti-slavery Unitarian minister William Adam. He wrote that Adam founded the Unitarian church in Calcutta, fell in with Rabindranath Tagore and became a Unitarian. Eagle-eyed former GA Chief Officer Derek McAuley wrote, pointing out the error. 'Do you not mean Ram Mohun Roy, as Tagore was a much later figure (although with family links to the Brahmo Samaj established by him)?'

I quickly consulted Andrew, who hastily replied: '*Mea culpa, mea culpa!* First class degree to Derek for noticing. However, it wasn't the people I mixed up – just their names!'

Andrew went on to propose a dire punishment for himself for making this mistake. *The Inquirer*, however, is very forgiving, recognising that Andrew was simply carried away with his own enthusiasm. A brownie point to Derek McAuley.

* * *

A couple of spare hours in London gave me a walk in the sunshine along busy Southampton Row, where I learned some new words. The pavement half blocked by barriers, I looked up to see the wall of a three-storey office, deeply covered with greenery, all over except spaces for the windows. Seated in a cradle, dangling half-way up, a woman was gardening, trimming out dead leaves and inserting new plants. The man working with her explained. 'Biotecture, the combination of "bio" and "architecture". The plants absorb carbon dioxide and give out oxygen. It helps the environment.'

'Even in this fume-filled atmosphere, with all this traffic?' I asked.

'Sure. We install greenery where it can do most good: in our streetscapes, offices, schools, universities, hospitals, shopping malls, bus and rail stations and airports and more. We place trees, shrubs, hedges and rows of plants like those up there. They're watered hydroponically. Wherever we have done this we have seen the benefits over the course of a number of years. You'd be surprised. Those plants up there attract bees, wasps and all sorts of insects, including some I've never heard of. It's phytoremediation, the use of living plants in the removal, degradation or containment of contaminants.' Impressed, I looked again at the swinging cradle up high. 'Is it dangerous?'

'No. That rope would lift a double-decker bus, and we have two of them.'

I wished them well and walked on. 'Biotecture', 'streetscapes', 'hydroponic', 'phytoremediation' and 'contaminants'; that was enough new words for one day.

* * *

In city-centre Bradford a sign above a shop caught my attention. 'Divine Barbers. Multicultural hairdressing.' It made me think about hair in religion. Jesus is usually depicted with a beard. He was human, after all. Roman Catholic monks have tonsures on the crown of their heads, a reminder of the crown of thorns. Celtic monks shave the front of their heads and grow their hair down the back. Amish men have beards but no moustaches. Muslims like to wear beards; Muslim women keep their hair covered. Muslims shave their

FUNNY OLD WORLD

By John Midgley



infants' heads all over, boys and girls. Some Hindus do the same. Sikhs grow their hair and the men keep theirs in a turban. Some Hindu yogis (men) grow their hair to maximum length. Buddhist monks shave their heads. Orthodox Jewish men grow their beards and sideburns; married women cover their hair with scarves or wigs. Some Hasidic women shave their heads.

I once heard a Reform rabbi apologise for not having the traditional bearded appearance of his calling. 'Not all rabbis have beards,' he said, 'just as not all beards have rabbis!' Does Bradford's Divine Barber cater for all this variety? What would happen if I went in and asked for a Unitarian haircut?

* * *

Good to attend our Ministers' September conference at Great Hucklow. Also attending, and in parts leading, were students training for our ministry. Student Jane Blackall co-led a challenging session on varieties of sexual orientation and how to relate and be inclusive. With some, when the gender is less precise than we are used to, pronouns become a little difficult. He? She? Him or her? Use the plural 'they' or 'theirs' sometimes, even for one person. Much to learn here. We also learned that we have a composer among us. Student Lizzie Harley of the Chapel in the Garden at Bridport composes and has recorded CDs of solo piano music. These can be found on *YouTube* and its links, under her former name Elizabeth Hornby. (Or, on her website: <http://elizabethhornby.com>) Spontaneously created, they have a contemplative spirituality tone and are well worth checking out. Try her *Butterfly Island* CD for a taster.

* * *

The blackberry crop was good again at Great Hucklow. As a jam-maker, I'm always on the lookout for new recipes. In the nearby Castleton Visitor Centre's shop, I spotted a jar labelled Chuckleberry Jam. A new one to me, I wondered if it was a joke. Or was someone mistaking chuckleberry for huckleberry, a wild berry found in the US, similar to a blueberry. These grow wild and are small, so the word 'huckleberry' was often used as a nickname for something unimportant, or insignificant. Scholars believe this was the meaning Mark Twain had in mind when he named his Huckleberry Finn character. But no, the chuckleberry is a new variety, developed in Norfolk as a cross between a redcurrant, a gooseberry and a jostaberry (itself a hybrid of a gooseberry and blackcurrant). Sounds good for jam-making (it's the pectin, you know) but where to get supplies? If any reader can obtain a few pounds of them for me, I'll gladly make and sell the jam, just for a laugh. Profits to a favourite Derbyshire-based charity.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.



Please leave God out of it

Ken Johnson
Dean Row Chapel, Wilmslow

To the Editor › Christine Avery (Opinion, *Inquirer* 21 September) has identified God as a 'creative, dynamic force' which produced all that was, is and is to be. A question to be asked is how? I do not suppose for a moment Christine believes in the literal truth of the creation myths lurking behind all organised traditional religions. Many have moved on from those, but still cling to some notion of God. They are reluctant to attempt to understand what science teaches us of the natural processes by which creation came about. I find the process of creation easier to understand if a concept such as God is not involved. Christine has concluded that God does the good things of which we approve but is not responsible for 'the cruelty, pain,

ugliness, murder and war which confront us with the definitive absence of God'. Physical pain is unpleasant, but it warns that there is something amiss. It is said that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Is that not true also of ugliness? People inflict cruelty and murder because they have some malign end in view. War is frightful but is sometimes justified, and may be caused by religious zealots who believe their all-powerful God urges killing those with differing views. How much more peaceful it would be, if such injunctions and the deities did not exist! But these 'evil' things are as much part of creation as is the glorious sunset. When my first wife died of cancer at the age of 55, I did not blame God, or wonder why such a disaster had to happen to us. I did not have a God to

blame. Brenda's mother had died from the same malady as she had. In my pain, I did not feel the need of the support of God. That support came from my family, friends and colleagues, and my grandmother's proverbs; 'What cannot be cured must be endured' and 'nothing good was ever gained by worry', and not least, Brenda's advice to me before she died: don't grieve unduly; you have the rest of your life to live, live it to the full. At the end of her piece, Christine implied people might disagree with her or would want to reply. I hope my opinion will be useful to her. How wonderful it is to belong to a denomination for which my contribution may be 'the promising (divine?) thunder of contradiction' to which Christine refers!

Remember the true Pilgrims

The Rev Derek Smith
Mansfield

To the Editor › I write to remind my fellow Unitarians that 2020 will be the 400th anniversary of the sailing of the Pilgrim Fathers to the 'new land' across the Atlantic. Some civic authorities are already planning how to mark the occasion. For Unitarians it presents both a challenge and an opportunity. Much of the celebrations will endow the Pilgrim Fathers with a respectability now that they were denied 400 years ago. It will be assumed that they were some sort of Puritans seeking to purify the established church, whereas they were Separatists wanting to set up their own religious groups outside the established church. The State will honour them now whereas back then they were looked upon as troublemakers and possible threats to law and order. That's why they suffered fines and imprisonment then, and were arrested when trying to move elsewhere.

Next year they will be viewed as adventurous heroes for us to be proud of. We Unitarians have an opportunity to tell the true story, possibly with all our congregations having a Special Service next September, and all congregations displaying a couple of Wayside Pulpit posters giving a few pithy facts. We might even make known our own tolerance and acceptance of those religious groups in our own times regarded as unwelcome outsiders among us, and as threats to our own way of life. And do note that our Unitarian Congregation in Plymouth, Massachusetts, America, traces its beginnings back to the Pilgrim Fathers.

It would be very interesting to know what fellow readers of *The Inquirer* think about ways of marking the Pilgrim Fathers' anniversary next year.

Hope in the dark

Richard Bober
Meditation Fellowship

To the Editor › 'Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.' – Desmond Tutu

Perhaps many readers of *The Inquirer* will be feeling that political behaviour and speech has sunk to a new low in recent days with the so-called leader of the free democratic world openly engaging in racist speech.

It is all too easy to feel despair at this dark state of affairs.

Can I bring to your attention one small (albeit very small) candle of hope.

The Meditation Fellowship held its summer weekend at a Quaker retreat holiday centre in Grasmere Cumbria. During our stay we were able to meet a small group of Iraqi/Syrian asylum seekers who were being welcomed by the Quaker community. The Quakers run a scheme (The Welcome Project) whereby small groups of refugees from conflict are offered a short stay in the beautiful centre in the picturesque setting of Easdale in Cumbria. It is funded by donations and continues the Quaker tradition of hospitality for those fleeing conflict as remembered by the Kinder-transport in the 1930's.

So at a time in which many of us may be feeling somewhat 'down' as to the state of the world I bring to your attention this tiny glimmer of hope in the darkness.

Tom Banham never wasted a minute

The Rev David George Cecil (Tom) Banham was ordained and installed to the East Antrim congregations of Ballycarry and Raloo in April 1971. Thus began an uninterrupted life of service and commitment of almost 50 years to the Non-Subscribing Presbyterian Church, ceasing only with his peaceful death, aged 90 years, in the Somme Nursing home for ex-Servicemen, in his own room on 14 August. Tom, although sociable – he especially enjoyed talking about the church and theology – was a very private man who seldom talked of his previous life. He valued his own space and kept to his own room in the home. From that room to the very end came articles to various magazines, ideas for the future of the church and the welfare of students.

A member of the Royal Navy

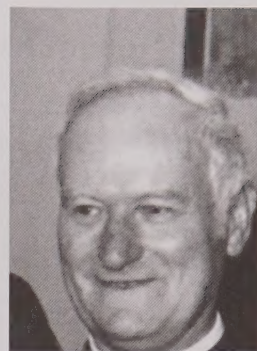
He was particularly concerned with care of the dying after seeing a high-ranking commander of ships and men, treated like a small child because of the incapacity of age. The indignity such a man endured distressed Tom who, mercifully, was spared that himself. Originally from Devon, he seldom spoke of his family. He had a distinguished career in the Royal Navy, attaining the rank of Lieutenant Commander. One of his commanding officers called all his men Tom and it stuck to him for life, as did strict naval discipline. He was punctual to a fault. From there he trained at Unitarian College Manchester, obtaining a London BD – and hence to ministry in Northern Ireland.

For his first Christmas there, he visited every single member of his churches and each treated him to a glass of sherry. He claimed he just made it back to the Manse before collapsing and remembered nothing more of the season! He became adept at extracting sheep from barbed wire and recounted on occasions their ingratitudes!

Started a choirs festival

After a few years he was called to the ministry of Rosemary Street, the oldest dissenting meeting house in central Belfast where he remained until retirement. This magnificent 18th-century building suffered badly in the “Troubles”. Even the foundations were slightly out of alignment. While expert architectural knowledge was required, Tom himself spent hours in dungarees at the church doing whatever he could. His boundless capacity for hard work and inspired leadership helped restore it. Afterwards he looked to enhance the social, spiritual life of the congregation. A great lover of classical music – he instigated an annual Choirs Festival, to which all congregations were invited. They aimed high, contributions from their own choirs and then joining all together in anthems like Zadok the Priest. He inherited the mantle of his friend, the late Rev John Radcliffe, as the champion of ecumenism in the denomination, serving on the Irish Council of Churches – at one time special representative of all the smaller Churches – and also the Irish Inter Church Meeting Talks at Ballymascanlon. He collaborated on producing a

baptismal certificate recognised by all the denominations and edited or wrote several booklets on liturgy and theology. He avoided history as he felt the present and future more important. Although the BD was his last formal qualification, he became an extremely knowledgeable academic, through voracious reading. It's doubtful if he ever wasted a minute of any waking hour he lived.



An *Inquirer* columnist

Tom Banham held most offices in the church, including Clerk of Synod and two terms as Moderator. In his first term he enjoyed a unique distinction of being the only one to open a new church, Cairncastle, in over 60 years. He also restored the organ, deemed irreparable due to woodworm, reporting with an impish grin that the stops were tied up with various items of ladies' lingerie! On completion of his work in good time for the opening, he asked for a jigsaw as thanks. On being presented with a 1,000-piece puzzle of a naval battle, he explained patiently that there were two types of jigsaw – and the one he wanted was the other type! Sedentary hobbies for Tom were for old age!

About then, 1989, he also became a regular contributor to *The Inquirer*, with accounts of life in N Ireland under the general heading, 'John Bull's Other Island'.

Tom's other great achievement was his work with youth. With John Radcliffe he set up a denominational youth group, the Young Non-Subscribers, which ran for many years. As Sunday school convener, he reformed completely, the test for Sunday school work. Instead of a written exam format, he designed a display of work done by the children throughout the year – including pictures, models and music. So it is still.

A support to all his colleagues

His work with the Sea Scouts at Lewins Mead in Bristol was continued when he ran a Troop for handicapped Scouts, based at Fleming Fulton School in Belfast. Every year he took them camping, even the most severely disabled, assisted by a group of ladies, gently 'pressganged' from the church to cook.

In accordance with his strict wishes, Tom's funeral was a quiet one at Roselawn Crematorium 19 August. The last slot in the day enabled the Rev Dr David Steers to give a detailed account of his many achievements, with an affectionate tribute to the warm and generous support Tom gave to his colleagues, especially if they were ill or in trouble. He will be sorely missed.

By Lena Cockcroft

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It's time for a Big Sing

Sunday 22 September 11:00: I am sitting on a hard chair with a group of 15 artists in the light worship space of the former Unitarian mission church on Mansford Street in Bethnal Green East London, now the home of the Live Art Development Agency. We are holding a service. Away from my own congregation for this Sunday we form another — a Quaker style circle held in silence. As we sit peacefully the faint strains of a hymn, 'Rock of Ages Comfort Me', begin to permeate the walls of the upper worship space — sung by the African Pentecostalist congregation that is now the only official 'church' meeting weekly in the building. A small group, they sing quietly and in harmony. Someone in our circle says, 'I like the singing'.

Me too. In fact I find myself almost moved to tears as we sit in companionable quiet with the traces of song falling and rising into the room.

On Sunday last we were half way through a weekend workshop I was leading for a group of artists who had signed up to my exploration of what blessings and cursings mean and do. We were dancers and theatre makers, a horticulturalist illustrator, a ceramic artist and a dance critic. A day earlier we had roamed the immediate neighbourhood with nature writer Bob Gilbert, whose book *Ghost Trees* maps the history of the poplar trees of East London. Bob brought our attention to the plants clinging to the 'rock face' of the old mission building. We found tiny plantings in the cracks of the pavement, miniature samples of shepherds purse flowering close to the ground, rosemary and nightshade against walls and three types of nettle within yards of the place.

So when the singing upstairs began on Sunday morning, slowly, quietly and tunefully, I breathed deeply and felt tears sting my closed lids. 'Rock of ages cleft for me/ let me hide myself in thee.' The old words felt as if they had become new — the shepherds purse clinging to the cleft in the wall, the tiny plantains and nettles hiding in the pavement rock beneath our feet. The plants were a blessing, resilient in one of harshest places of the city. As we sat the singers seemed to release their song into our silence. Another kind of blessing, the gathered voice.

Sunday's ghostly hymn was not the only community anthem that I connected to last week. Invited to conduct a funeral for a folk enthusiast and Morris dancer, at the pre-funeral family and friends meeting I was introduced to that extraordinary Fairport Convention anthem 'Meet Me on the Ledge', written by Richard Thompson when he was 19 and memorably recorded by the band when it still included the dream voice of Sandy Denny. Their lifted voices bring tears to my eyes too. It's a hymn, a modern folk hymn with the traces of Rock of Ages in its heart. We are all on the ledge, in the cleft, on the mountain looking for shelter from the rain and wind. How can I keep from singing.

What is it about singing together? In this time of turbulence it seems that that old habit of singing together has returned to become a powerful way of connecting in community. It has become meaningful in new ways as people gather to sing in groups and choirs, impromptu gatherings, at protests and rallies. The Fire Choir was brought together to sing at protests by folk singer and collector of songs Sam Lee; the Three Faiths choir to sing songs across faiths. There are

refugee choirs and gospel choirs, choirs for non-singers and choirs for a day, choirs for peace, choirs for mental health. In all of this, I wonder where our big choir is. Where are we meeting for song beyond congregation, singing big, singing for our lives to share our own rich singing tradition in ways that take us out into the wider community of song? I grew as a Unitarian in the congregation at York, where one of our great modern British hymn writers worships. Andrew Hill's wonderful words have touched and nourished me. So have the tunes and adaptations of David Dawson. This column is named for a hymn by one of the great hymn writers of our time, Carolyn McDade, and the hymns and songs and words of other writers from across the tradition, Sally Rogers, Frank Clabburn and Holly Near among them, contribute to a rich transatlantic Unitarian song-book that I am beginning to feel needs to be heard more widely.

Here's a secret — we don't sing hymns as much as we did in our congregation now. We sing chants without accompaniment, we sing rounds, we listen to recorded music but we don't share the deep knowledge of hymns, nor do we have consistent accompaniment to sing them — but they matter. The excellent Unitarian Music Society sings. We raise our collective voices at Summer School. Congregations sing and some have fantastic musicians, and there are music leaders and players who are committed to the gathered voice and who could lead a choir of hundreds. So for Rising Green this month I am suggesting this: a Unitarian 2020 big sing. Across the country, in different places, quarterly, let's say. We meet for a day to sing the songs we love, and make a Unitarian choir. A choir that can sing at protests, at celebrations, at meetings and at events. A big sing that all can join. A big sing that joins up the dots of the British and American traditions.

How does it relate to ecology or to change, or to greening the world? Because the voice matters. Because it joins us beyond our small worshipping communities. Our singing voices and the words of our beautiful hymns and songs deserve a wider audience. We need to sing in a big group in joy and feel our presence. So send me *your* hymn notes, *your* best loved, *your* ten hymn hits, *your* Unitarian-plus songbook recommendations for the Big Sing — and let's sing together.

'Rising Green' is a monthly column and experimental essay series about the ecology of Unitarian community. Your responses are very welcome, and as this project continues I hope to include them. You can email me at: justrevclaire@gmail.com